

Sandinista's literacy campaign

by Sue Johnson

According to Nicaragua's Deputy Minister of Education Fernando Cardenal, "Illiteracy is a violation of human rights. It's as serious as torture because it prevents people from developing themselves. People cannot participate in democracy until they can read and write. It's as important as food and clothing. That's why it's our top priority."

And that's why, on March 23, Nicaragua will launch a massive \$20 million campaign to make literate more than half the Nicaraguan adult population who, under the tyranny of Somoza, had been denied access to schooling. These 900,000 people over the age of twelve do not know how to read or write because under Somoza's government all schooling cost money and only a privileged few could afford the tuition.

The Somoza family held Nicaragua for more than forty years, with the political and economic support of the United States. With Somoza the majority of people had few economic or human rights:

- the Somoza family owned 25% of the arable land;
- 5% of the population owned 58% of the land, with the remaining 95% of the people on only 42% of the land;
- 54% of the population were maintained in a malnourished state. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the average Nicaraguan was living on 1700 calories per day while the WHO minimum was 3,000 calories per day;
- infant mortality rate was 130 deaths out of 1000 births;
- in the city 46% of the people had no sanitation facility and in the country this rose to 81%;
- in the city 31% had no running water and in the country this rose to a staggering 99%;
- electricity was not available to 59% of the population;
- in 1976, the defense budget was more than double that spent on education;

and, in a population of 2,600,000, there was more than 36% officially unemployed: more than half of the working population.

It was in this context that the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) gained mass support amongst the Nicaraguan people, and with their support was able to militarily defeat Somoza and his National Guard. That war was waged and won with incredible losses for the Nicaraguan people. All opposition to Somoza was hunted by the well-equipped National Guard and, if caught, tortured and killed. The civilian population suffered in the war when Somoza ordered the National Guard to bomb the cities in retaliation for the Sandinista attempts to gain control of the cities.

Emerging from the war and the long economic rape by the Somozas, the country is bankrupt. Following the Sandinista victory and Somoza's flight from Nicaragua, the country's external debt was calculated to be in the neighbourhood of \$1.5 billion.

The FSLN government's commitment to literacy goes back to the roots of the movement to liberate Nicaragua. In 1952 when Carlos Fonseca Amador founded the FSLN and began work in the mountainous regions of the country, FSLN members taught the peasants not only to handle arms but also to read and write.

According to Marilicia Chacon, the public relations director of the literacy campaign, "This helped the peasants to understand that they were exploited because of their ignorance and to understand the causes of the system which maintained them and their families in ignorance. They understood that illiterate they would never be able to read a work code and claim their legal rights. The FSLN made a commitment with the people, and especially with the peasantry, that once in power we would struggle to combat the ignorance, the blindness in which we were submerged."

Carlos Mendoza, who works in Managua now, in a slaughter house, explains, "During the three years I fought with the Sandinistas they said that when we won I would learn, and now it is happening. Knowing how to read and write—what you take for granted—is beautiful to me."

Mendoza was a member of a small test group who began their literacy classes soon after the FSLN government came to power. All the men at his factory have the same story: they came from large

on-hand in Nicaragua to launch the work leading up to the full campaign starting in March. Through this method the teaching will be based on the lives of the peasants and workers. For instance, in the north of Nicaragua where coffee is the main crop, the lessons will start off with the coffee plant and the work the peasants do.

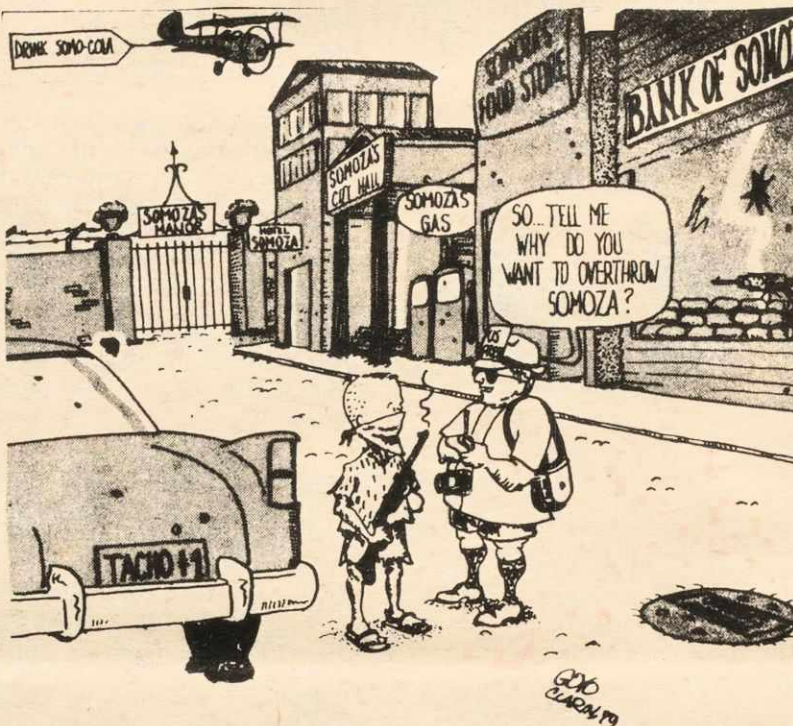
And, the courses are designed as part of the political education that will mean all the people can take part in the decisions to be made. In the night schools for the slaughter

situation we are passing through. He must see the oppression in which he has been submerged; he must see the importance of production for the people; and he must realize that if he learns to read and write he is capable of producing more; for he can learn new techniques."

The literacy campaign started off only fifteen days after the FSLN overthrew Somoza in the summer of 1979. Immediately, a census was taken to establish the need for the literacy campaign, and learn which areas were most needy of work. Then, in December of 1979, 40 teachers and 40 students were trained. In February 1980, these 80 trained a further 580, who in turn, train 7,000. In the end there will be 175,000 high school students and teachers sent throughout the countryside and the cities' factories to teach the 900,000 illiterates the basics of reading and writing. This campaign will last six months, after which there will be further efforts to continually upgrade the ability of the whole Nicaraguan population to participate in the decisions and work ahead. During the campaign all of the countries regular schools will be closed since all teaching personnel will be fully involved in the literacy work.

The bulk of the funds to carry out the literacy drive has to be raised from international commitments of the part of governments (West Germany has sent \$800,000) and international aid organizations (the World Council of Churches has donated \$500,000). In Canada, OXFAM-Canada has committed at least \$40,000 to be raised from donations of the Canadian public.

The Nicaraguan people realize that this campaign is immensely expensive. But, the struggle for literacy is being called the "second liberation war" and given as much importance as the first war to liberate the country from Somoza.



families where the simple struggle to survive—to find food, clothing, and the minimum employment available—took all the time the family members had. They had no money for schooling with the tuition fees that were charged. And then, with families of their own, they had no chance for night school, and their children faced the same future.

The literacy program in Nicaragua is founded on successes (and learning from some failures) of many other countries: Cuba, Tanzania, Mexico, Peru and Mozambique. The Nicaraguan campaign is based on the work of Paulo Freire, and he was

house workers, one lesson starts with the sentence, "The popular masses made the insurrection." The class learns these words and this sentence, and then makes new words with the letter "p". In some areas, classes will be formed around a photograph, either from the past war of the current struggles to gain economic stability, and the workers will discuss the situation and the political unity that is necessary to forge ahead.

Chacon explains, "Politically we think the peasant must be conscious of the

Halifax Campaign

In Halifax, the Latin America Information Group is working to raise funds for the literacy campaign in Nicaragua. Students, teachers, literacy associations, unions and the general public are being asked to support the Nicaraguan campaign.

Through the Halifax-based Information Group, funds will be channelled through OXFAM-Canada to the Nicaraguan Ministry of Education, earmarked for the literacy work. Through OXFAM-Canada, a nationally registered charity, the Canadian donations can be increased through participation of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), and donations can be given tax receipts.

The literacy campaign de-

mands many resources:

- pencils, pens, notebooks,
- blackboards, chalk, drawings and photographs,
- vehicles, food rations for teachers,
- lanterns and hammocks for the teachers, and so on.

The total cost of the campaign is more than \$20 million. Your support can help the Nicaraguan people guarantee their rights to participate in the decisions of their workplace and in their government.

You can support the literacy campaign by making a donation to the Latin America Information Group, P.O. Box 3460, Halifax, N.S., or directly to OXFAM-Canada, P.O. Box 18,000, Halifax, N.S.

Remember to mark your donation for the Nicaraguan literacy campaign!

